DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 821 FL 024 153

AUTHOR Lengeling, M. Martha
TITLE True Friends and False Friends.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Communication Problems; Contrastive Linguistics; Definitions; *English (Second Language); Error Patterns; Foreign Countries; *Intercultural Communication; *Interference (Language); Language Usage; Second Language Instruction; *Vocabulary Development
IDENTIFIERS *Cognates

ABSTRACT

A discussion of cognates in second language teaching, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL), looks at reasons and methods for teaching both true and false cognates ("friends"). A definition of cognates is offered, and a distinction is made between a cognate and a borrowed word, with examples from several languages. Textbooks' treatment of cognates is examined, and some problems arising from overemphasis on use of true cognates are noted, including potential for stilted language use and the danger of adopting false cognates. It is recommended that the teaching of false cognates be included in ESL instruction, to promote vocabulary development. Techniques include the teacher's development and incorporation into instruction of a collection of false cognates, using standard language exercises and games for identifying false cognates. Examples are offered. Contains six references. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 399 821

Author: M. Martha Lengeling
Centro de Idiomas
Universidad de Guanajuato
Lascurain de Retana 5
Guanajuato, Gto.
36000 Mexico
Fax (473) 2-72-53

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Martha Lengeling

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"True Friends and False Friends"

Often cognates and false cognates are overlooked by the foreign language teacher. Cognates are thought to be so similar in the native and target language that the teacher disregards them completely, but in fact they can cause problems and need special attention. Frequently teachers are unaware of false cognates and little emphasis is given to them. The following article will define cognates and false cognates using examples in Spanish and English.

Richards, Platt, and Platt define cognates as "a word in one language which is very similar in form and the meaning to a word in another language because both languages are related" (59). Both Spanish and English are Indo-European languages, while Spanish has Latin roots and English has Germanic roots. Whitley makes the distinction between a cognate and a borrowed word in the following:

> a word Wx from the Language X and a word Wy from the Language Y are termed 'cognates' if and only if they have been inherited from the same ancestor language of X and Y. They are not true cognates, in this sense, if their resemblance is merely a coincidence, or if X borrowed its word from Y, or Y from X, or both borrowed their words from yet a third language Z. (324)

FL024153

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Examples of words that have been borrowed from English and have been incorporated into Spanish are: sandwich, láser, video, and líder. Technology has produced words like 'el fax', 'el disquette', and 'el video' that have merged into the Spanish language. On the other hand, Spanish words that are now part of English are canyon, ranch, cockroach and patio. Words such as actor and animal are present in both Spanish and English because they are derived from Latin. Other languages such as French and Italian also influence Spanish and English with words such as hotel, control, piano, and tráfico/traffic. All of these examples are words that have similar meanings in both languages.

Textbooks often include a section for the learner showing how these cognates are similar and how they make the learning of a foreign language easier. A few cognates that are easy to recognize in English and Spanish are: rose/rosa, horoscope/horoscopo, secret/secreto, and course/curso. The learner can easily recognize these words and understand them in the target language because the meanings and spellings are similar in both languages. From the beginning teachers can help students learn vocabulary by letting the students guess the meaning of these cognates. Learning these cognates helps in the building of vocabulary and are easy to remember. However, Norman Coe comments that "while this fact (Spanish is developed from Latin) offers the learner a large access to a large passive vocabulary, it also tends to make his or her language sound formal" (87). Coe gives an example of a learner who may use a formal word such as "extinguish" instead of a more commonly used word such as "put out " causing his or her speech to sound more formal. Relying on cognates is beneficial to the student, but at the same time the use of certain cognates may cause the speaker's speech to appear stilted and not authentic. Another problem that arises is the pronunciation of these

cognates which Whitley calls "phonetically seductive, inviting transference of a source-language pronunciation" (325). Learners may make an overgeneralization and form a new word that does not exist in the target language. An example of this is the word 'aborción' which should be 'aborto' in Spanish. Cognates can be helpful and learned with little effort but at the same time students and teachers must be aware of the problems these words can create.

A further problem arises for the learner due to the presence of false cognates, also known as false friends or 'faux amis'. Reid calls them "deceptive demons" because they are misleading and cause problems for foreign language students. Richards, Platt, and Platt define false cognate as "a word which has the same or very similar form in two languages, but which has a different meaning in each" (136). The two words 'libreria' and "library" seem equivalent and both come from Latin but have different meanings. 'Libreria' refers to a store where books and paper can be purchased (bookstore) whereas "library" is a place where books can be found, but not bought. In Spanish the word 'asistir' means "to attend a class" but it is confused with the word "assist" in English which is synonymous with "help". Often Spanish speakers will produce a sentence such as "I assist my English class four times a week". False cognates cause problems in communication because the learner thinks these words have the same meanings in the target language as in their first language whereas in fact these words mean something different.

One can see how the use of a false cognate in Spanish creates a different meaning if used in English. These different meanings may lead to misunderstanding in communication which is a type of mistake that needs to be clarified. In English the word "history" refers to a subject or the past

events of a group of people; the equivalent word in Spanish is the same but also refers to a story. The Spanish speaker will use "history" instead of "story". Another example is with the word 'sensible' in Spanish which is synonymous with "sensitive"; 'sensible' bears a strong surface similarity to the English word "sensible", but in fact they have different meanings. Some false cognates such as "history" or "investigation" might be confusing because the semantic meanings are related but not similar. For example the word "investigation" refers to looking for information which is usually done by a detective or one who is acting like one; "research" is also looking for information but at an academic level.

Emphasis should be given to the teaching of false friends in order that ESL learners improve their vocabulary. Teaching of these cognates will help the learner become aware of the problems that arise with cognates. If the teacher is teaching a homogeneous class and has a good knowledge of the native language of the learners, then this emphasis on false cognates will benefit all of the class. Teachers can begin to collect false cognates that cause problems and incorporate the teaching of these words in the classroom. Lists of false cognates between two specific language such as those of Reid, Marin, and Prado can be useful to the teacher, but must be used carefully so as not to overwhelm the learner with long lists that will not be of significant use. Depending on the time and the level of the class, a couple of false cognates can be discussed quickly and easily in class. It can be explained to students how these words are different and what the correct word is for the corresponding word in the target language. These false cognates can be recycled in the class to avoid any problem that might arise with the use of these false cognates. Error analysis can be used to test or explain these cognates. Teachers can give students sentences that contain these false

cognates used incorrectly. The following is an example of this type of exercise:

1. Tom is a student whose career is accounting.
2. Ed's dormitory in his house is always dirty.

The students are asked to find the error and then make a correction. Often students find this exercise interesting because they can see the problem that these false cognates cause and can recognize their errors. Adult learners enjoy this activity because they can analyze the problem. Another activity that can be used with these problematic words is to have the student write a sentence using these false cognates showing that they understand how they are used. If a certain tense is being studied at the time, the student can incorporate this tense with the false cognate. Students can be given sentences that require them to decide which word is correct such as the following sentence:

The teacher is reading a _____ (story, history) to the children in her class.

The use of vocabulary games can be used to aid in the understanding of these false cognates.

While cognates are helpful in the learning of a foreign language, false cognates can be troublesome because of their different meanings to similarly spelled words. Often vocabulary is overlooked by teachers because of the vast number of lexical items, but the teaching of cognates and false friends can help the ESL learner from a beginning level to the more advanced level.

Works Cited and Consulted

Coe, Norman. "Speakers of Spanish and Catalan." Learner English. Ed. Micheal Swan and Bernard Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 72-89.

Marín, Diego. "Los 'falsos amigos' en español/ingles." The Canadian Modern Language Review 37 (1980): 65-98.

Prado, Marcial. "Falsos Amigos en Lexicongrafia Bilingue." Hispania 73 (1988): 721-27.

Reid, John T. "123 Deceptive Demons." Hispania 31 (1968): 280-297.

Richards, Jack C., John Platt and Heidi Platt. Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics. Great Britain: Longman, 1992.

Whitley, M. Stanley. Spanish/English Contrasts. Washington D. C.: Georgetown UP, 1986.